

Political Science 357  
The Problem of Evil  
Spring 2010

Professor Alan Wolfe

The aim of this course is to introduce students to classic texts from theology, moral philosophy, and literature dealing with the problem of evil and then to apply those texts to contemporary examples of terrorism, genocide and ethnic cleansing. The course is designed to sharpen the ability of students to think seriously about one of the most enduring of questions, learn to cut through popular rhetoric about it, and reflect upon what is happening in the world around them.

So long as human beings have had the capacity to act, they from time to time act in bad ways; in this sense, evil can be said to be an omnipresent aspect of human existence. Still, contemporary Americans were reintroduced to the persistence of evil by the events of September 11, 2001. They saw completely innocent people killed. They began to hear about an “axis of evil.” They suddenly started paying attention to regimes that oppressed their own people or sought to swallow their neighbors. They debated whether their own country had engaged in torture and, if it did, whether in doing so it was adopting the tactics of the countries they were fighting.

As important as such discussions are, they frequently take place in the absence of a long history of thinking about evil that has marked the Western intellectual tradition. Four key turning points in that tradition will be examined in this course. The first is Christian theology, especially the writings of St. Augustine, which not only are crucial in their own right but helped stimulate such modern thinkers as Reinhold Niebuhr and Hannah Arendt. The second includes literary classics written by Shakespeare and Milton.

The third is Enlightenment moral philosophy, especially in the writings of thinkers reflecting on the Lisbon Earthquake such as Voltaire, Kant, and Rousseau and the reaction against them characteristic of a thinker such as Nietzsche. And the fourth are the works stimulated by the Holocaust, including those by Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, and Stanley Milgram.

The kinds of questions the course will pose include the problem of theodicy, or how a good God could condone evil things. But it will also ask questions such as these: are human beings evil by nature or is evil something learned? Is there a capacity for evil inside all of us or should the term be reserved only for those who commit the most horrendous of atrocities? Can evil ever be described as “banal?” Is faith an antidote to evil or its accomplice? Is evil on the increase? What are the best ways to respond to evil when it occurs?

Having asked such questions as these, the course will turn to contemporary issues such as religiously-inspired terrorism in the Middle East, ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia and Africa, and debates over the use of torture. The aim will be to judge whether the tools the Western tradition has given us for understanding evil still work or whether we need new ways of thinking about the problem.

The course will be a seminar limited to 15 students, with permission of the instructor required. The seminar format will allow for maximum student participation, although I will take the leading role in framing the questions raised by each reading. Each student will be required to write a term paper selecting an example of evil in the modern world and applying the insights of the Western tradition to it.

This course is the result of a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities program on “Enduring Questions.” The NEH encourages proposals that assign classic texts in their entirety. In fulfillment of that obligation, the reading for this course is extensive. Students who take it should have the time to devote to considerable amounts of reading. They will be well rewarded if they do by the insights of some of the West’s most important thinkers.

The following are the books for the course:

Augustine, *Confessions* (Penguin Classic)

Shakespeare, *Richard III* (Yale University Press)

Voltaire, *Candide* (Penguin Classics)

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Vintage)

Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr* (Yale)

Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Penguin Classics)

Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (Harper Perennial)

Samantha Power, *“A Problem from Hell”* (Harper Perennial)

Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Just War Against Terror* (Basic Books)

Here are the main readings and the dates we will be discussing them:

January 25, 2010

Augustine, *Confessions*

February 1, 2010

Shakespeare, *Richard III*

February 8, 2010

Voltaire, *Candide*

February 15, 2010

Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

February 22, 2010

Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

March 8, 2010

Niebuhr, selected essays to be announced

March 15, 2010

Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*

March 22, 2010

Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority*

March 29, 2010

Power, "*A Problem from Hell*"

April 5

General discussion

April 12

Film, "Darfur is Dying"

April 26

Elshtain, *Just War on Terror*

May 3

Conclusion